

By Alicia C. Shepard

THE AWARDS DINNER IN SAN FRANCISCO LAST NOVEMBER promised to be an awkward evening. Some worried what the reaction would be when the "Journalist of the Year" award was presented. How would the crowd of 240 behave when investigative reporter Gary Webb of the San Jose Mercury News, author of 1996's most controversial piece of journalism, received the crystal obelisk?

Webb's three-day series in August focused on two Nicaraguans who said they had imported and sold drugs during the 1980s to raise money for the CIA-backed contras, struggling at the time to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista regime. The articles said that Oscar Danilo Blandon, Norwin Meneses and a Los Angeles drug dealer, "Freeway" Ricky Ross, had started the first mass market for crack in South-Central Los Angeles, ultimately triggering a nationwide crack epidemic.

The series, "Dark Alliance," also gave the impression—

although it did not flatly assert—that the CIA was involved in crack cocaine's spread. "You can't read our series any other way than to suggest the CIA, at a mini-

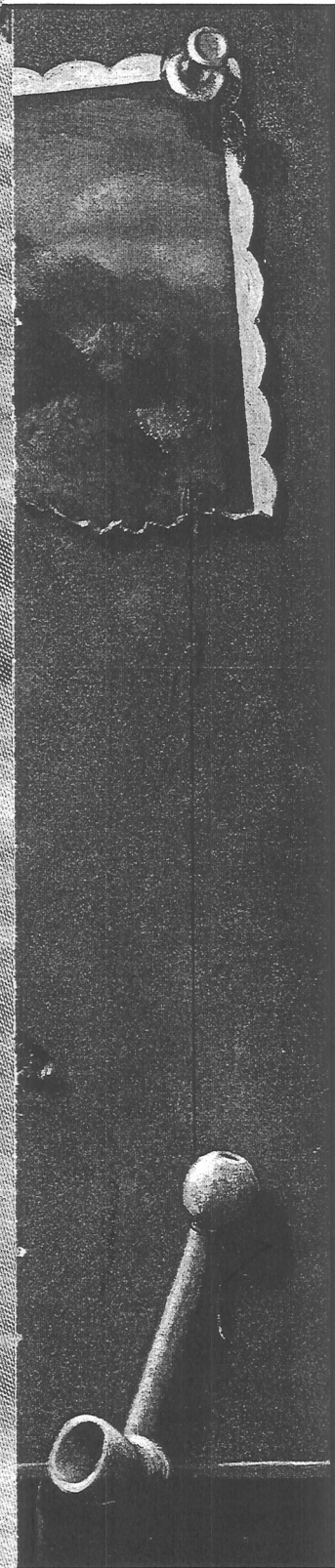
mum, turned a blind eye toward drug dealing in the United States," says Phil Yost, the Mercury News' chief editorial writer and an outspoken critic of his paper's high-profile series.

When the 20-member board of the Northern California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists met in August, it was searching for outstanding local work by a single journalist. Webb, who had spent 15 months on his blockbuster series, was an obvious choice. But the board's unanimous vote took place before Webb's articles were subjected to withering criticism in early October.

Skeptics questioned the wisdom of giving Webb the award after the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and New York Times had sharply challenged the series' findings (see Free Press, November). But the chapter decided to press

The San Jose Mercury News' series on the CIA, the contras and crack cocaine was 1996's most controversial piece of journalism. Reporter Gary Webb broke new ground, but did he go too far?

THE WEBB THAT GARY SPUN



ahead. The task of presenting the award fell to emcee Dave McElhatton, a well-known anchor for CBS' San Francisco affiliate KPIX, who handled it with characteristic aplomb.

"Elements of the Mercury News series and presentation are open to dispute, as are criticisms of Webb's stories," McElhatton told the audience of journalists on November 12. "A full airing is necessary and good for us all. But the chapter is convinced that the best journalism is that which is not afraid to venture into controversial areas of overwhelming national significance."

When Webb accepted the award, he turned to his boss, Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos, who has borne much criticism. Webb told Ceppos of a bomber pilot who said that the flak is most intense when you are over the target.

The reporter received a standing ovation from virtually everyone in the audience, with the conspicuous exception of those at the two San Francisco Examiner tables. "I'm with the Examiner, and I did not stand because to stand would have shown my approval and respect," says Managing Editor/News Sharon Rosenhouse. "You don't normally give an award to someone as 'Journalist of the Year' when there are all these questions and concerns."

The questions and concerns over Webb's story are myriad. Is what he wrote true? Was his reporting responsible? Did he selectively use information that backed up his thesis while ignoring evidence contradicting it? Was the series edited with enough care? Why didn't the executive editor read the entire series before it was published? Was any consideration given to the effect that the series might have on the African American community, where many have long believed the crack plague is part of a government conspiracy?

After the Mercury News series ran, it was quickly spun in the retelling. Black talk show hosts and listeners, the black media and the alternative press touted the story as proof that the CIA allowed the U.S.-backed contras to deal drugs in America and use the profits to buy weapons, blithely ignoring the damage to the black community. This particular sentence played a significant role in such interpretations: Cocaine "was virtually unobtainable in black neighborhoods before members of the CIA's army brought it into South-Central in the

1980s at bargain basement prices."

There are those—among them some journalists, CIA watchers, conspiracy theorists and black leaders—who argue that, regardless of the series' flaws, Webb has performed a public service by focusing attention on whether the CIA helped set off the crack cocaine epidemic. "Even though we can criticize the San Jose Mercury News story, the net effect is that it has generated major coverage of a scandal that really was never fully investigated and fully covered before," said Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at the private National Security Archive, in a radio interview.

While the core of Webb's stories may be true, he has been chastised for overselling the story by writing it in a way that would lead reasonable readers to conclude that the CIA was involved in the drug trafficking, referring repeatedly to the "CIA's army." And the series' major premise—that the trio highlighted in his series alone triggered the crack epidemic—has been contradicted by major newspapers.

For his part, Webb told a group of journalism students at the University of California at Berkeley in November that "anybody that read this story would be a fool if they came away with the conclusion that we said the CIA ran this operation. We were very specific in saying who did what."

Webb stands firmly behind his story, and hints that there is a part four in the works with "tons more information." He says he can't control what others are reading into his work.

Webb broke new ground on the 10-year-old story of a contra-cocaine connection. He was able to show how cheap Colombian cocaine, brought in by Nicaraguans, was sold to a specific drug dealer in South-Central Los Angeles, who turned it into crack. "That's an advance," says Los Angeles Times Washington Bureau Chief Doyle McManus. "I wish we'd picked up that and pursued it."

Yet by overreaching, the well-respected Mercury News hurt its hard-won credibility and shifted the focus from the essence of its story to questions about the reporter and the paper's editing process. Some journalists argue that it was irresponsible to publish such an incendiary story without making absolutely sure all

claims could be fully supported.

The level of anger among African Americans, many of whom interpreted the series as conclusive evidence that the federal government encouraged drug trafficking in their neighborhoods, was apparent when CIA Director John M. Deutch met with residents of South-Central Los Angeles at a heated public forum on November 15. Few appeared to be mollified by Deutch's assertion that the CIA had nothing to do with drug trafficking and his promise to fully investigate the affair.

"The paper, in order to act responsibly, needed to recognize this story was going to have a huge impact, not just on the black community, but on everyone's faith in the government," says Joann Byrd, who taught ethics at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies before becoming the Seattle Post-Intelligencer's editorial page editor (see Bylines, page 9). "This was going to be a terrifically big story. If a journalist thinks a story is going to have a big impact, you better have an absolutely unimpeachable report, and this one wasn't."

Some of the harshest criticism has come from Mercury News staffers. "Virtually every claim in the opening paragraphs has been shown to be, at best, a disputed assertion," says editorial writer Yost. "The story takes no account of contrary evidence. The relationship between the CIA, drug-runners and black America is a sensitive topic. We have not served well the cause of getting at the truth; we have served the cause of creating a sensation."

Journalists from other newspapers have also found fault with Webb's reporting and conclusions. The Miami Herald, which, like the Mercury News, is owned by Knight-Ridder, decided not to run the San Jose paper's series because it raised too many red flags.

At the Mercury News, concerns about the intellectual honesty of the series and the torrent of negative publicity virtually paralyzed the paper for a brief period last fall. Reporters who don't like Webb because of his aggressive style, and there are many, are quick to criticize his work. Those sympathetic to Webb's editors are more apt to defend it.

"I've been here almost 20 years," says telecommunications reporter Mike Antonucci, "and I haven't ever seen a story touch a nerve internally as much as this one."

THE SERIES RAN AUGUST 18-20. WHILE its allegations were breathtaking, equally impressive were the paper's

San Jose Mercury News Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos has defended the paper's controversial series.



efforts to place the story and scores of supporting documents on its Web site. Not only could the paper's readers examine the story, hundreds of thousands more could—and did—read it online on its Mercury Center site. Yet initially it was largely ignored by network news and major newspapers.

Lori Leibovich, assistant editor of the online magazine Salon, asked Webb a month after his series ran why it wasn't picked up by the mainstream media. "By now, journalists have read the series, and they're figuring out how to tell this story in 12 inches because that's what most newspapers have the space to do these days," Webb replied. "Secondly, a lot of newspapers—and TV particularly—they're just chickenshit."

But while the Old Media weren't interested, the New Media were eating it up. Thanks to the potent combination of talk radio and the Internet, "Dark Alliance" slowly and inexorably attracted national attention.

Black-oriented talk shows in particular played a major part in bringing the series to the fore. "I think talk radio played a very substantial role in energizing audiences on this story," says Bob Ryan, director of Mercury Center. And cyberspace helped build the momentum. "The Internet," says Ryan, "made it easy for the talk radio shows and the alternative press to read the story, process it and pass it on—often with embellishments, interpretations and conclusions not present in the story."

And while the pieces appeared in a Northern California newspaper, they resonated powerfully to the south, in South-Central Los Angeles, a prominent victim of crack's carnage. The fiery Rep. Maxine Waters, a California Democrat who represents the area, and other black leaders were outraged. They quickly secured promises of congressional hearings and a CIA investigation into the paper's charges.

Two of the nation's leading newspapers, the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times, both of which serve large black communities, were besieged with outraged calls. "Why aren't you covering this story?" demanded readers, some of whom accused the papers of being part of a cover-up.

Webb had predicted that the mainstream media would ignore his findings. In an effort to stimulate interest, the paper tried to take advantage of a news peg. It scheduled the series to begin just before drug kingpin Ricky Ross—a prominent figure in the articles—was to be sentenced on cocaine charges.

"That way, the San Diego and L.A.

papers can use the news angles of the sentencing as a way of getting into the story themselves—without having to give the San Jose Mercury News any credit," Webb wrote to Ross in prison on July 15, adding that the series had once again been postponed because top editors hadn't read it.

Ross' sentencing was delayed, but Webb still worked at drumming up publicity. For a time, the Mercury News' Web site for "Dark Alliance" (<http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/>) kept readers informed about Webb's media appearances. In September, people calling Webb at the paper's Sacramento bureau heard a message asking them to leave this information on the answering machine: "Your name or the name of your organization or show, channel, frequency, audience—including type and size—and the date and time of the requested interview or appearance."

But despite his efforts, by September's end the major papers and the networks still hadn't paid much attention to "Dark Alliance."

"I looked at it when it initially came out and decided this was not something we needed to follow up on quite the way they [the Mercury News] put it," says Karen DeYoung, the Post's assistant managing editor for national news. "When it became an issue proliferating in the African American community and on talk shows, that seemed to be a different phenomenon."

The Post then turned to reporters Roberto Suro, Douglas Farah and Walter Pincus, who covered the Iran-contra affair, to look into the Mercury News' story. Michael A. Fletcher reported on the firestorm Webb's story had created in the black community and on Capitol Hill, where legislators and prominent black leaders including Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan were demanding—and getting—investigations.

"The phenomenon of the reaction was, in and of itself, a story," says DeYoung. "But to explain and address the phenomenon, we had to report the story ourselves."

The Post reporters reached conclusions strikingly different from Webb's. "A Washington Post investigation into

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Ross, Blandon, Meneses and the U.S. cocaine market in the 1980s found that the available information does not support the conclusion that the CIA-backed contras—or Nicaraguans in general—played a major role in the emergence of crack as a narcotic in widespread use across the United States," the paper reported on October 4.

The Post said the two Nicaraguans were small-time cocaine dealers with weak contra links and couldn't have started the crack epidemic by themselves. The paper said that, contrary to the Mercury News' assertion that Blandon was the "Johnny Appleseed of crack in California," the two men's drug deals were "only a small portion of the nation's cocaine trade."

The Post wrote that Blandon, according to his testimony in federal court, had actually stopped sending drug money to the contras before he began dealing with Ross in 1983 or 1984.

Suro and Pincus also challenged the way Webb obtained information from Blandon. Unable to reach Blandon after trying many avenues, Webb fed questions to Ricky Ross' attorney, who was cross-examining Blandon at the time. Some say Webb influenced Ross' trial by raising questions about Blandon's possible CIA connection.

Webb sees nothing wrong with this. "This was a perfect situation," Webb told journalism students at Berkeley. "You had the target of your investigation sitting up there on the witness stand under oath in federal district court.... How many people wouldn't do that if you couldn't interview him directly?"

As the Post was working on its story, the Los Angeles Times was agonizing over how to react to such an explosive story on its own turf—and in an area that the Times is often accused of ignoring. Members of the Los Angeles black community noted sarcastically that they had to rely on a Northern California paper to confirm their suspicions about government involvement in drug trafficking. Editor Shelby Coffey III wanted his paper to do something more substantial than daily stories on the uproar.

In the middle of September, Times Washington Bureau Chief McManus got a phone call from an editor in Los Angeles. "What's this all about?" McManus was asked. "What do you think we should do?" The Times ultimately decided to throw three editors and 14 reporters at the story and do a three-part series. It ran October 20-22—two months after the Mercury News' series.

The first part explored how and when crack had come to Los Angeles. "Crack was already here" before Blandon began selling cheap cocaine, the Times asserted. The second part looked at whether a CIA-sponsored operation funneled millions to the contras, as Webb had claimed. The third part dealt with why the story had such a powerful impact on the black community.

The Times could find no proof that "millions" had been funneled to the contras by Blandon and Meneses, as the Mercury News had reported. At most, Times reporters could substantiate that about \$50,000 was sent to the guerrillas.

(When he asked the Mercury News' Ceppos how the paper had arrived at the "millions" figure, McManus says Ceppos put him on hold and asked one of the series' editors, who told him it was an estimate based on the volume the dealers had sold and the prevailing market price. However, while the lead of the opening story said "millions," later in the piece Webb wrote, "It was not clear how much of the money found its way back to the CIA's army....")

The Times, like the Post, also disputed the Mercury News' timeline, saying Blandon had sold cocaine and sent the profits to the contras for less than a year. Webb wrote that this arrangement was in place from 1981 until 1986, when Blandon was arrested.

Webb counters that it's the big national papers, not the Mercury News, that got it wrong. "The problem was they got the information from government officials and didn't check what they were told," he told AJR. "I had five or six independent sources saying Meneses and Blandon were dealing [for the contras] all the way through until 1986." He noted he'd spent more than a year reporting the story while the others had spent weeks.

The Times also strongly disputed the Mercury News' contention that Blandon, Ross and Meneses were the first to open the cocaine pipeline from Colombia's cartels to Los Angeles' inner city.

But the paper relied on anonymous sources to make important points that contradicted the Mercury News' find-

ings. McManus says that may be a valid criticism of his paper's work, adding, "I wish we had been able to identify them by names, of course."

The Times also rewrote history in its series. In a 1994 series on crack, the Times' Jesse Katz described Ross as the biggest drug dealer in town. Two years later, as Ross' importance soared in the Mercury News, it plummeted in the Times. In its October series, Ross was depicted as just one of the city's major dealers. "So which one of these stories about Ross is true?" asks Mercury News reporter Pete Carey.

On October 21, the New York Times weighed in with a front page story discounting Meneses' and Blandon's contra credentials, suggesting they were more likely garden-variety drug dealers using the contra cause as a convenient cover. "What was really new was Blandon's relationship with Ricky Ross," says Tim Golden, who covered the contra saga in the mid-1980s for the Miami Herald. Among others, Golden, now the New York Times' San Francisco bureau chief, describes the Mercury News as having inflated a newsworthy story by implying that the CIA was directly involved in starting the crack epidemic.

While the big three attacked Webb's premise, they did concede he had advanced the story beyond what had been reported on the subject in the mid-1980s, when the suggestion of CIA involvement in drug smuggling was a prominent issue that warranted a Senate investigation. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), chairman of the investigating subcommittee, said in 1989 that, despite suspicions, the panel couldn't prove the agency had allowed coke smuggling to help the contras.

"Webb had a good story about two drug dealers loosely connected to the contras in the early 1980s—an item to add to the list of evidence linking contras and cocaine trafficking," wrote David Corn, the Washington editor of The Nation, who has written extensively about the CIA. "But the paper went too far, claiming without solid proof that 'millions' flowed from these mid-level dealers to the contras—it may have been \$50,000—and in tying these traffickers to the rise of crack, a phenomenon bigger than a mere two pushers."

WHEN THE WASHINGTON POST'S ARTICLE appeared, it played like a must-see movie at the Mercury News. Although quickly deemed a "knockdown" and attributed to professional jealousy by Webb's editors and supporters, it stunned the newsroom nonetheless.

Here was one of the nation's elite newspapers tearing apart the foundation—not just a few facts—of the Mercury News' series, a series many had thought offered the paper a good shot at its third Pulitzer Prize.

Yet some inside the newsroom were pleased to see the Post's story because the Post raised the same questions they had after reading it. "To me the biggest thing we should have done is to point out that there is contrary evidence," says Mercury News economics reporter Scott Thurm. "We shouldn't have ignored everything that contradicts our theory."

Surprisingly, Webb's story wasn't vetted by a platoon of high-ranking editors the way many investigative stories are at the Mercury News and other newspapers. City Editor Dawn Garcia, Webb's editor, stayed with the project from beginning to end. Although the paper has an investigative projects editor, Jonathan Krim, he did not edit it because top management wanted to spread projects around rather than leave them in the hands of an elite team.

Then-Managing Editor David Yarnold was also closely involved with the series from the start. While Garcia supervised Webb on a daily basis, the story was known as "Yarnold's baby."

But a month before it ran, Yarnold left the paper, accepting a job with Knight-Ridder's new media division. His oversight role was taken over by Paul Van Slambrouck, assistant managing editor for news. Van Slambrouck explained at a staff meeting when the controversy erupted that he had "amped down" Webb's initial story. Van Slambrouck and Garcia declined to comment.

Ceppos, who had been preoccupied with searching for a new managing editor, didn't read the entire series before it went into the paper. Nor was the series read by Ryan, director of the paper's Web site, who said it was not his responsibility. It was reviewed by one of the paper's lawyers.

After questions were raised about the series, the Mercury News created a committee to examine the way it carries out projects. It is considering, among other things, a formalized editing process that would ensure more top editors are involved, says editor Chris Schmitt, a committee member.

"Basically, the overall editing process broke down," says Schmitt, a former investigative reporter. "While it's true that specific people may have caught things if they'd been editing the project, that shouldn't have mattered. It

was a system breakdown.”

Some found the internal criticism of the Webb story disheartening, prompting a Ceppos memo dated October 10—six days after the Post story appeared.

“I was spurred to do this by separate conversations with a couple of folks, one of whom hasn’t been at the Mercury News very long, who expressed surprise and deep disappointment at what they perceived to be the almost gloating reaction in parts of the newsroom to the Post’s criticism of the series,” wrote Ceppos, who became executive editor in 1994 after 12 years as managing editor.

“As one of them put it, if this is what happens when a reporter aspires to do really high-end work, what’s the percentage in sticking one’s neck out to do that kind of work in the future, when his or her colleagues will try to tear it down? I found that very troubling. This person was not reacting to reasoned evaluation of the series but to the backbiting, whispering and sometimes gleeful tone of some of those conversations.”

Ceppos’ memo did not curtail the dissent. Nor did his comments to the press end the debate. He has been criticized for failing to read the entire series before it appeared in print and for making statements supporting the series, then appearing to change his mind.

On August 28, Ceppos sent a reprint of the series and a letter to editors throughout the nation saying, “At first I found the story too preposterous to take seriously: A drug ring virtually introduced crack cocaine in the United States and sent the profits of the drug sales to the U.S.-government supported contras in Nicaragua. All the while, our government failed to stop the drug sales.”

On October 18, Ceppos described the series more modestly in a rebuttal letter to the Washington Post, which declined to print it. He said the paper had “established that cocaine dealers working with CIA-sponsored contras sold large amounts of cocaine powder that was turned into crack in predominantly black neighborhoods of Los Angeles at the time that the crack epidemic was beginning there, and some of the drug profits were sent to the contras to buy war supplies.”

Ceppos has given dozens of media interviews on the series, including one to AJR for a November article, but says he will no longer do so. He stands by the story and says that he has been misquoted. When asked to discuss “Dark Alliance” for this story, he declined, referring a reporter to his November 3 column in the Mercury News.

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A Hard-Charging Reporter

GARY WEBB, 41, IS THE KIND OF REPORTER WHO LIKES TO PUSH A story to the limit and doesn’t mind the heat.

“Gary is a guy who made a career out of sticking sticks in people’s eyes for all the right reasons,” says former colleague Bill Sloat, an investigative reporter for Cleveland’s Plain Dealer, where Webb worked before joining the San Jose Mercury News in 1988. “He does journalism the way Pete Rose plays baseball. He’s aggressive and he’ll play the game at the edge.”

“Dark Alliance,” Webb’s latest attention-getting series about possible CIA involvement in perpetuating the crack epidemic in Los Angeles, has engendered harsh criticism.

But controversy is nothing new for Webb who, along with the Plain Dealer, lost a libel suit in 1990 in which a jury awarded \$13.6 million to two promoters of Cleveland’s Grand Prix. The newspaper appealed the decision and eventually settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.

Webb is not one to avoid confrontation. In May 1983, he shot a Covington, Kentucky man with a .22 caliber rifle after finding the man breaking into his Triumph sports car in an attempt to steal a \$135 tape deck. According to the Kentucky Post, where Webb worked at the time, Webb fired two warning shots before shooting the man in his buttocks.

In fact, Webb appears to thrive on controversy. While some journalists might cower if their reporting were attacked by the Washington Post, New York Times and Los Angeles Times, Webb reacts with unflappable confidence. “I’m used to it,” he says.

Says Mary Anne Sharkey, who was Webb’s bureau chief when he worked in the Plain Dealer’s Columbus bureau, “If the Washington Post took on one of your stories, you’d be devastated. Gary’s not like that. He doesn’t care. That’s part of what makes him a damn good reporter.”

Webb, says Sharkey, was known as “the carpenter” at the Plain Dealer “because he had everything nailed down.” She adds, “Gary’s documentation is awesome and his work ethic is unbelievable.”

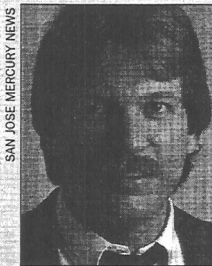
Webb, who has won numerous awards for his reporting, now stands accused of overreaching in his series, although he categorically denies the allegation. Yet criticism of his work caused enough concern that Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos assigned another reporter to check out Webb’s story, an uncommon journalistic practice. But it’s not the first time another Mercury News reporter has been asked to scrutinize Webb’s reporting.

In 1994 that task was handed to Mercury News reporter Lee Gomes. He was asked to look into claims by Tandem Computers Inc. that there were inaccuracies in Webb’s stories about the San Jose-area firm’s \$44 million contract to develop a computer database system for the California Department of Motor Vehicles. The system didn’t work, and Webb laid part of the blame on Tandem. AJR obtained a copy of a five-page memo Gomes, now a reporter at the Wall Street Journal, wrote on August 2, 1994, after looking into one of Webb’s stories on Tandem before it ran.

“Having read all the material cited in our story as well as all of the other relevant material I could obtain, and having done my own reporting,” wrote Gomes, “I believe that our story is, in all its major elements, incorrect.” He wrote that Webb had taken quotations out of context, didn’t cite evidence that contradicted his thesis and read an “ambiguous contract, from July 1, in a way that served its conclusion, ignoring not only all other readings of the same document, but the bulk of the rest of the other evidence....”

The paper made some minor changes based on Gomes’ assessment and ran the story on August 14—almost two years before “Dark Alliance” appeared. The latest series has been criticized on grounds strikingly similar to those cited by Gomes.

—Alicia C. Shepard



SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

GARY WEBB

The Mercury News Series

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"Interestingly," he wrote, "all of the articles accept parts of our core finding as fact—that drug dealers associated with the contras sold some amount of drugs in Los Angeles at around the time the crack explosion happened. Most agree that some of the money went to the contras. I continue to believe that's news, by anyone's standards, despite the what's-the-big-deal tone of our critics."

Ceppos attempted to respond to the Post's criticism in a two-page letter. The embattled editor found some support from Post ombudsman Geneva Overholser, who chided her paper for not giving Ceppos the opportunity to respond.

The Mercury News has also been criticized for using a logo in which a figure smoking crack was superimposed over the CIA seal with the words "The story behind the crack explosion" underneath. Although it wasn't used as the logo for the series, the version with the CIA seal appeared on the Web site, with the original series in the paper as a teaser to the site and in some reprints.

After the Post raised questions about the logo's implications, Ceppos had it removed from the Web site and ordered hundreds of reprints destroyed. Ceppos told an L.A. Times reporter that editing standards at the paper's Web site are not always consistent with those of the print version of the paper. This angered Mercury Center staffers, and Ceppos personally apologized to them and wrote a letter to the L.A. Times modifying his earlier statement.

Ceppos says he wishes the paper had included a paragraph high up in the story stating it had not been able to conclusively prove CIA involvement (see "Spelling Out What You Don't Know," December). Webb, on the other hand, says he has problems with that approach and is glad the paper didn't do so. However, in the wake of the criticism, the paper routinely includes this sentence in followup stories: "The Mercury News series never reported direct CIA involvement, though many readers drew that conclusion."

Some journalists say the paper has adopted a "blame-the-reader" approach. Yet even its own editorial board drew the conclusions most of the public did. A headline over one editorial read, "Another CIA disgrace: Helping the crack flow."

Rob Elder, the paper's editorial page editor, says he stands by the editorial but that it might have been written differently had he read the Washington

Post and Los Angeles Times articles first. "I wish I could have read them before," he says. "We all have different viewpoints after reading them."

Says the L.A. Times' McManus, "It's been hard to figure out whether they stand by everything they wrote or whether they've had second thoughts because, at different times, they seem to express different sentiments. I still hate to say nasty things about other editors, and I hope I'm wrong. But it somehow seems disingenuous for the editor to say the paper never intended anyone to get the inference that the CIA had anything to do with the introduction of crack to L.A. The readers got that point. Their editorial board got that point."

To its credit, the Mercury News did not try to hide the criticism. It put the Post story and others raising questions about the series on its Web site and it assigned one of its best reporters, Pulitzer Prize-winner Pete Carey, to explore the Post's analysis.

Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Archive recently asked Carey how he felt checking out Webb's story. "I said I had a bad feeling in my stomach the whole time," Carey told AJR as he recounted the conversation. Kornbluh asked why. Carey responded, "Have you ever been a reporter in a newsroom? This is an awful experience." Webb, too, says it was a "very awkward" situation.

Nine days after the Post story appeared, Carey had his own front page analysis examining the criticism but reaching no conclusions. Carey acted more like an ombudsman for the paper performing an in-house audit. He did not write a correction, Carey says, but rather took note of criticisms and tried to answer them. He quoted three experts disagreeing with some of the series' conclusions about the spread of the crack epidemic.

"The big issue," says Carey, "is did we structure and mold the information we had and present it in a manner that would lead readers and the many victims of the crack epidemic to blame the U.S. government for their pain and suffering?"

At presstime Carey was trying to put together the definitive explanation of how the crack epidemic began.

IN THE END, MANY WOULD ARGUE THAT, BY leading reasonable readers to believe the CIA played a role in the origins of the crack explosion, the paper hurt its credibility, hurt journalism, caused irreparable damage in the black community and shed little light on the question of whether the CIA looked the other way

while cocaine was smuggled into this country. Webb and his reporting have become as much the issue as the CIA and crack.

"If the holes in the story hadn't been there," says Mercury News telecommunications reporter Howard Bryant, "there wouldn't have been all this negative coverage by other newspapers. That's what, as a black person, bothers me. Those papers have twice the resources we have. Who knows what they would have uncovered had they used their resources to build on the story rather than discredit it. You read the story and there really were holes in it. I just wonder why we had to oversell it."

And the overselling had a steep price. "I believe we'll be left with no smoking gun on the CIA," says Susan Rasky, a journalism professor at the University of California at Berkeley and a former congressional reporter for the New York Times. "The Mercury News, a fine newspaper, will be left with a black eye, and the black community will be left to believe that not only is the government engaged in a conspiracy but the establishment media are as well."

On November 26, the Senate Intelligence Committee held a hearing on alleged CIA involvement in drug trafficking. Blandon had testified the day before in a closed hearing, telling committee members he had channeled \$60,000 to \$65,000 in drug profits to the contras, but before he had met L.A. drug dealer Ricky Ross. "In response to direct questions from the committee, Mr. Blandon stated that he had never had any contact with the CIA and that the CIA was not involved in his drug trafficking business in any way," said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Penn.).

But that information may not matter to many who have read the series.

When Miami Herald Executive Editor Doug Clifton was in Boston last fall, he saw fliers on telephone poles announcing a forum on how the CIA brought crack cocaine into the black community, based on the San Jose Mercury News' series.

"So the genie's out of the bottle," says Clifton. "No amount of refinement or backtracking or setting the record straight will put the genie back in. This is probably as clear-cut an example as you can have of why newspapers have to be so careful about their revelations." ●

AJR contributing writer Alicia C. Shepard, a reporter for the San Jose Mercury News from 1982 until 1987, wrote about newspaper design in our December issue.